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# For Autistic Children, a School's Coffee Shop Imparts Skills While Raising Money

By **WINNIE HU**

EDISON, N.J. — The coffee shop at [Woodrow Wilson](#) Middle School is serious about service with a smile. When Edward Lin, a seventh grader, stared silently at his feet the other day instead of greeting a customer, his teacher prodded him.

"How can I help you?" the boy mumbled, still staring at his feet.

His teacher prodded him again. Edward looked up. Then he wrote out the customer's order and, finally, broke into a smile, braces and all.

Edward is in a special class for children with autism or multiple learning disabilities that is charged with running the coffee shop every Friday morning. Setting up in the home economics room, Edward and 11 classmates have rung up more than \$1,000 in sales of coffee, tea, doughnuts, cookies and cupcakes to the school's staff since October. On request, they deliver to classrooms.

The coffee shop was the idea of their teacher, Thomas Macchiaverna, 26, who saw it as a means to instill not only social niceties in children who often have difficulty with human interaction, but also business acumen and life skills beyond the classroom. "The overall goal here is to make these kids functional members of society," he said. "It's a different avenue than the standard educational curriculum. It's outside the box, which you have to be with this kind of program."

The profits from the coffee sales — averaging \$100 a week — have helped pay for things like a recent bowling trip and a [Thanksgiving](#) feast for the class; as part of cost-cutting this year, the Edison district eliminated money for field trips.

The Edison coffee shop illustrates how schools across New Jersey are finding ways to expand their special education programs and services outside the traditional classroom to better

serve students with autism and severe learning disabilities, many of whom were once sent out of the district to costly, specialized programs.

At Northern Burlington Regional High School in Columbus, special education students run their own auto-detailing shop on site, cleaning dozens of cars a year owned by parents and school staff. And along the Jersey Shore, students with autism at Southern Regional High School in Manahawkin started their own ice cream business and opened a gardening center where they grow plants and vegetables to sell; in the past three years, they have earned about \$10,000 to support activities.

But such efforts have fallen short in other schools, prompting Gov. [Chris Christie](#) last month to propose as an alternative the creation across the state of more public schools devoted to students with autism, to ease the financial pressure on districts and to ensure quality of instruction.

Statewide, as diagnoses for autism spectrum disorders have risen, the overall number of special education students has increased 3.5 percent to 199,207 since 2008, while out-of-district placements have increased by 1.5 percent to 14,615 during that same period, according to state statistics.

In Edison, 80 of the 850 students at Woodrow Wilson Middle School receive special education services. The school started a self-contained special education class last year that now has a dozen students, all boys between 11 and 13 years old. Academically, their reading and math skills range from first to seventh grade, said Mr. Macchiaverna, who is called “Mr. Mac.”

The new coffee shop got off to a shaky start. The first day it opened, the machine was mistakenly unplugged, and there was almost no coffee. The next week, the school had no drinkable tap water after a flood in the area, but teachers saved the day by bringing jugs of bottled water from home. And then came the snow days and delayed openings.

The coffee itself was once so dark that it got complaints. And one student spilled hot water on his leg and had a mild burn, despite supervision by Mr. Macchiaverna, two assistant teachers, a speech teacher and a life-skills teacher.

But since then, the coffee has improved and the students have settled into a comfortable routine.

On a recent Friday, the coffee shop opened for business with folksy music (think Cat Stevens) playing over speakers. Teachers like to pass time there during their free periods,

drawn as much by the convenience as the friendly service. Fifteen have standing orders. Others donate the doughnuts and handmade pastries for sale.

“The teachers love it,” said Cori Jensen, a music teacher, with a \$2 cup of tea in hand. “We wish we could have it every day.”

The students take turns doing the various jobs in the coffee shop. Mr. Macchiaverna pointed out the lessons built into each one. For instance, the students at the cash register use their math skills to make change, while those delivering coffee learn to navigate the school.

And above all, he said, they practice people skills. Even here, customers can be demanding.

“I want a bacon, egg and cheese on a bagel,” said Michael Franciscus, the gym teacher, who orders off the menu every week just to joke with the students.

“We don’t have any; we have coffee,” replied Norman Shamy, 12, looking perplexed.

“Irish coffee? Cafe latte?” Mr. Franciscus continued. He settled for a \$1 cupcake.

“He’s funny,” said Norman, adding that the shop was his favorite part of school because, “I like talking to the customers.”

Jenni Carlock, Norman’s stepmother, said that he looked forward to the coffee shop days. “It gives him direction and teaches him leadership skills,” she said.

Patricia Cotoia, the school principal, is a coffee shop regular. “It’s not about the coffee or the cookies, it’s about the interaction and seeing how capable the kids are,” said Ms. Cotoia, who will invite parents to the shop in the spring.

“We may have to switch to iced coffee in May,” she said, “but we’ll get there.”